



Opinion | Thailand: A Cultural Paradise Under Assault by Globalization

– Sebastiano Angeli, September 28, 2017



Thailand has some of the most pristine landscapes in the world. Often even simply traveling by scooter or minivan exposes you to the some of the most breathtaking vistas, leaving you feeling as if you've entered a sort of heaven in the world, flaunting such a diversity of plant life, radiating bright, lively green tones, deep aromas, and sounds of the wild.

Upon the shores of this paradise crash the waves of the sea, giving distinction to the spray of islands. They are truly an impressive sight, displaying magnificent fauna found just beneath the crystal-blue waters. The sight is so amazing that it's almost impossible to describe it; fish of every color and description swim about with curiosity or nibble at the seaweed on the stones on the sea bottom.

But what can be said of the Thai people? The annals of the last century describe the Thai as an easygoing, lively people, equally capable of enjoying a moments pause in the calm caress of the wind and of living in a state of spontaneity.

And yet amidst all this natural beauty, Thailand has been deeply corrupted by international tourism and globalization.

The Thailand of the last century has all but disappeared. The first Thai you will meet upon arrival in Bangkok will be an immigration control officer. Without a word, they'll take your passport from your hands, and after having looked it cautiously, return it to you without much more than a glance.

Yet more irritating is the feeling you get from the moment you step into the city—that is, of being seen as a "walking wallet."

The vast majority of urbanites you will meet have no interest in making your acquaintance or helping you, but seem relentless in extracting from you the greatest possible sum of cash; from the tuk-tuk taxi driver, to the clothier, to the smoothie vender, they all aim to get the most they can from walking wallets.

And yet, upon further examination, this is clearly the result of tourists, who have turned the Thai into a people of vendors. Turning a profit on a sale, no matter what, seems to be the people's only concern. Walking about the streets of Bangkok and Chiang Mai, you get the impression that everybody is trying to sell you something.

The development, the technology, the skyscrapers and the improvement in infrastructure over the last quarter century has deeply altered this society; Bangkok now has its sights set on becoming the next Tokyo, and in many ways, it does it good. The development gap between Thailand and its Southeastern Asian neighbors, Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia is colossal. The level of comfort and welfare that the average Thai can afford is undoubtedly higher than that of the Khmer or the Laotians.

In Thailand the roads are well paved, public transportation and infrastructure is well developed, and the skyscrapers that overlook on the Bangkok's river symbolize the growing wealth and prosperity of a rising nation.

On the subway the men are well-groomed and dressed in blazers and ties, sporting the most recent smartphones and pass the time on social media. The domestic lives of the

Thai are hidden from the casual tourist, except in the smallest villages, where even children can be seen playing and men working the land.

In Thailand, it seemed as though the national symbol were the thousands of 7Eleven convenience stores, open 24/7/365. It seems as though there was at least one every 300 meters. In Thailand, there are no schedules or hours; one is always working, never sleeping.

This compared to passing through the streets of Siem Reap, the main tourist attraction of Cambodia, you can easily see children running about naked, playing gleefully in the mud. Each and every person you meet will greet you smiling, thrilled to meet someone so different from them.

The difference between these two people—the Thai and the Cambodians, so close to one another but so far removed—is quite impressive.

At this point I must ask myself if the great advances made in Thailand were really worth the sacrifices made in the character of the nation; if the great strides made in Thailand's economic development were truly a positive for the country.

Is it worth it for a people to enjoy material luxuries and sport expensive Western clothing, even if it comes at the cost of time for rest? The Cambodian seemed much more happy than those from Thailand, although they hadn't even the necessary clothes to cover their bodies, and their parents, focused on putting to pasture the cows, cultivating the fields or cutting the grass, were much more smiling and relaxed than the taxists of Bangkok or the sellers of Chiang Mai.

Doubtless the worst ill that has come from Thailand's modernization is the disparity in wealth between the upper and lower classes. The country has brought the two classes to the extremes, where the rich continue to grow richer and the poor grow ever poorer.

Not far from the cornerstones of the shining skyscrapers lie the dirty, rat-infested bidonvilles where many poor Thais still live. And yet, the upper class in Thailand seems completely disinterested in the world of poverty that lives at its feet.

I remain uncertain as to whether such uncontrolled development has either improved or worsened the quality of life of the average Thai. It seems to me that, for every pro there seems to be at least one con, which causes me to instinctively to ask myself whether increased globalization and modernization is really good for the world, at large.

Globalization seems to homogenize the world, erasing every form of diversity and obscuring cultures and traditions of different peoples. It is like a gigantic sponge that passes over everything, erasing differences and leaving everything the same in its wake. Now, I'm not one to say whether or not this gigantic sponge can be stopped or has already covered every inch of this world.

Regardless, if there was a way to stop or reverse this process, giving back to the people of this world their cultures and traditions, such that there was a sense of genuine astonishment at the differences between peoples every time we set foot on another continent without compromising the ability of each country to develop and meet the needs of its inhabitants, I would surely line up in favor of that project.

The worst effect of globalization I feel that we are seeing only now, consists in the fact that it is stealing from us our leisure and relaxation, making us slaves to our goods and properties, pushing us to work more each day, but in such a sneaky way that, by the time we realize it, it is already too late.

In closing, I want to let it be known that I am not opposed in any way to progress and global development; to the contrary, I aim to cast warning about the risks we face and the potential drawbacks of development.

Despite all that I have said, we must nonetheless continue to progress and develop, if for no other reason than to guarantee a good standard of living for all peoples. However, we should remain wary of losing sight of the what makes life worth living: happiness, freedom, and diversity.

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